DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 064 756 EA 004 327

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TITLE The Middle School: Pitfalls and Possibilities.
PUB DATE 12 Feb 72
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at American Association of School Administrators Annual Convention. (104th, Atlantic City, New Jersey, February 12-16, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Campuses; *Educational Environment; *Educational Innovation; *Educational Objectives; Flexible Schedules; Individualized Instruction; *Middle Schools; Speeches; *Student Needs; Teacher Qualifications; Team Teaching
IDENTIFIERS Illinois; Winnetka

ABSTRACT

The possibility of developing a separate educational institution geared to the scholastic and interpersonal goals of the middle school grades has become a major challenge for educators today. It was to attain this ideal of developing the many possibilities for children in this age range that the concept of the middle school campus was designed in Winnetka, Illinois. Locating two schools on one campus provided the solution to the problem of providing a continuous 4-year program that would recognize the differences in development during this period. One school is designed to serve the 5th and 6th grades while the second school houses the 7th and 8th grade students. To insure the continuity of the total program, the position of campus principal was created; and the administration, teaching forces, resources, PTA, and student government were all coordinated. Such a viable, functioning institution provides for continuous development, efficient use of physical and human resources, and the opportunity for change as the need arises. (Author)

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THE MIDDLE SCHOOL: PITFALLS AND POSSIBILITIES*

by
Joe A. Richardson

The concept of an ideal educational environment for students making the transition from primary to secondary school has teased educators since the early 1900's. Youngsters between the ages of ten and thirteen find themselves in a unique period of development, wavering between emotional dependency and intellectual sophistication, and their needs describe new parameters for learning in a highly individualized setting.

Traditionally, the major PITFALL in establishing a successful middle school program has been organizing a staff of teachers who truly understand and appreciate children of this age group. It seems difficult for many teachers to capitalize on the enthusisam and openness of these children. Given the most flexible schedule and most appropriate materials, the middle school program is only as good as the classroom teachers in charge.

The inclination to move toward specialization which results in shuttling students from teacher to teacher is related to teachers not wanting to become involved for any length of time with the many moods of the pre-adolescent.

The POSSIBILITY of developing a separate educational institution, geared to the scholastic, atheletic, aesthetic, and inter-personal goals of the middle-school grades has become a major challenge for educators today.

EA 004 327

*Presented at the American Association of School Administrators Annual Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, February 12-16, 1972.

That this is a critical stage in the maturing continuum is undisputed: motivation becomes genuine industry, skills emerge as real competence, tools begin to resemble those of advanced technology, and imagination is expressed in true art forms. Systematic instruction must be handled by specially trained personnel, who can offer the fundamentals of the adult world, and at the same time insure and maintain the security of an environment tailored to the specific reality of early adolescents.

It was to attain this ideal of developing the many possibilities for children in this age range that the concept of the Middle School Campus was designed in Winnetka, Illinois. The physical lay-out, organization of resources, scheduling techniques, and selection and training of teachers reflect the deep committment to personalized learning, long a tradition in this community.

The "Campus Concept," which became a reality in 1968, originated in the early 1960's when it became apparent that a building program was imperative. Typical of the Winnetka community, faculty, parents and citizens became involved in researching possible courses of action. From the outset, there were many positions taken as to how best to utilize the unique opportunity to design a new educational setting for grades five through eight.

Original thinking reflected a desire to develop a continuous four year program. Yet, recognizing the differences in development during this period, consideration was given to defining an environment that could accomodate these differences. Locating two schools on one campus provided the solution.

Through coordination of personnel and resources, it was believed that a child could move effectively through the four (or five) year block and at the same time have the added advantage of identifying with a building of no more than 600 students and 40 teachers.

The Middle School Campus

Skokie School, previously the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade school, now serves as the 5th and 6th grade school. The new Carleton W. Washburne School houses 7th and 8th grade students.

Under the new plan, Winnetka children attend school from age four through the 4th grade at Crow Island, Greeley, or Hubbard Woods School From the three primary schools, boys and girls enter the Middle School Campus.

To insure the continuity of the total program, the position of campus principal was created. This implied coordination of administration, teaching forces, and resources, as well as PTA and Student Government. Other facets of campus organization involved arranging for accurate and uncomplicated communication, both inter-school and intra-school, in areas of pupil services, reporting to parents, and staff development services. Assistant principals were assigned to each building.

Skokie School

Each teacher in the 5th and 6th grades has an assigned group of children to whom she is responsible in the major academic areas -- Mathematics, Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science. However, the entire staff is organized into teaching teams of three or four members for the purpose of cooperative teaching ventures. Members of a team have common planning periods in which they define specific programs geared to their own abilities and the needs of their students.

Teachers and teams are supported in their efforts by an extensive array of resources: the library and learning-resource center, a well-equipped science suite, closed circut television for 2500 megacycle programming, an active community volunteer program, Winnetka's own publication and curriculum department, and a materials perparation center. In addition to the regular staff, there are a number of special teachers and consultants who share duties across the campus.

Because of the flexibility of the schedule and availability of extra resources, teachers can provide for individual differences among their students. Frequently there arise opportunities for boys and girls to work independently or in small groups for remediation and/or enrichment.

A large number of ancillary professionals make it possible to enlarge Skokie's curriculum to include Art, Creative Dramatics, Instrumental and Vocal Music, Shop, Homemaking, and Physical Education on a regular and elective basis. Furthermore, a "Needs and Interests" program has

been established to encourage students to choose their own areas of investigation. Youngsters may select any one of thirty to forty activities to work on for a twelve, twenty-four, or thirty-six week duration. Model rocketry, wood-working, Great Books, science experimentation, sports activities, art projects, etc. cover a wide range of interests. A student may also, during this period, design his own pursuit, and when recommended, guidance can be obtained from the community talent pool.

Depending on each student's progress, he will spend two or three years at Skokie School. When he has accomplished the goals established (with his participation) for him there, he will proceed to Washburne School, at the other end of the campus.

Washburne School

Named after the great pioneer in American public education, Carleton W. Washburne School is an architectual delight. It is organized around two types of cooperative team teaching: vertical teaming (teams organized by department), and horizontal teaming (teams organized across disciplines).

To effect the continuous program, each student at Washburne School is assigned to an advisor, who will remain responsible for the learning needs of his small group of boys and girls through 7th and 8th grades.

As the program developed, it became apparent that it was necessary to have specilized academic training for teachers at this level. However, departmentalization tended to fragment the curriculum and segment the

students into many different and unrelated studies with the result that a student was known well only by his advisor. To correct this, the faculty decided to move into horizontal teams for personalized reinforcement. In this arrangement, a Social Studies teacher, Science teacher, Language Arts teacher, and Mathematics teacher work with the same group of 100 students and are thereby able to view each student in a number of different situations. This plan also enables the team to work together to construct joint units across academic disciplines thereby producing a sense of inter-relatedness and relevance.

Washburne School offers an unusual number of elective subjects, including Graphic Arts, Television Production, Typing, Music Appreciation, and French. These again are made possible through the coordination of specialized resources and personnel and entice students to seek different avenues of learning.

The "Needs and Interests" program at Washburne, like Skokie's, is committed to the realization that young people must have the opportunity to pursue innovative ventures of their own. The programs differ according to the unique abilities and curiosities of the participants. Forty-five activities, ranging from Oriental Art to the study of Pollution, provide a wide variety of exploration and experimentation for students and staff.

Throughout both schools, there is a constant effort to personalize the instructional program. The Mathematics curriculum best illustrates the use of individualized materials. The goals are well established and

clearly defined for the student. Rather than following a textbook style, the materials are organized into small units based upon a limited number of concepts. The format follows the basic precepts of programmed instruction, thus permitting students to progress at their own rate. Supportative services are supplied through learning centers, closed-circuit television, and the volunteer talent pool.

In conjunction with Northwestern University, the Winnetka Public Schools operate a graduate course under the title of Individualized Instruction. In this institute, held for six weeks each summer, teachers new to Winnetka, regular staff members, and teachers from other school districts study, in a work-shop setting, the philosophical meaning of individualized teaching while working on concrete programs with children enrolled in the summer school (Adventures in Learning). Here is where teachers are trained to work within the framework and ideals of the Middle School Campus.

Winnetka schools have traditionally encouraged their students to become actively involved in their own education. The development of student responsibility begins in the primary schools and is expanded at Skokie, so that by the time youngsters arrive at Washburne, they are ready to participate in a practical democratic setting. This is characterized by the respect shown students by faculty and administration and the number of student operated activities. The Student Council is an autonomous organization; faculty members are invited to join as advisors and representatives. A number of educational experiments, generated from the student body,

have been evaluated by both the staff and students and found to be very effective. Developing a mature sense of responsibility to society is not an easily attained objective among early adolescents.

At the conclusion of the 1969-70 school year, the administration and staff of the campus agreed that the initial implementation had been completed. The design seemed sound; only time and good evaluative techniques will determine its true value. However, at this point in the campus development, the administration, faculty, student body, and parents believe in this viable, functioning institution. It provides for continuous development, efficient use of physical and human resources, and the opportunity for change as new needs arise. As Professor Samuel Popper states in his book, The American Middle School -- An Organizational Analysis: "It should be fully institutionalized in its own physical environment, having specially prepared school personnel, and offering a program geared specifically to the concerns of early adolescents and the impact of society upon them." The Winnetka Middle School Campus represents a vital example of this ideal.